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SUBJECT: WHY WE NEED A DEMOCRACY DIALOGUE WITH AZERBAIJAN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Robert Garverick, for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) SUMMARY: Over the past year the democracy and human rights situation has worsened in Azerbaijan, harming the long-term stability of the country and our bilateral relations. Azerbaijan continues to be a strategically important country for the United States, particularly in terms of security cooperation and energy resources, and high-level engagement on democracy and human rights issues remains an integral part of our overall agenda. Post requests a meeting of the existing Democracy and Human Rights Dialogue through a visit from A/S Posner to Baku at the earliest possible time. This dialogue is our best opportunity to raise these issues at the highest level of the GOAJ, as well as to show our support for the embattled local defenders of our shared values of democracy and human rights.
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) As a secular country with a 96% Muslim population located between Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan remains a strategically significant country for the United States, largely because of its cooperation on security issues and its importance as an energy producer and transport hub. At the same time, the United States also has interests in the human dimensions of Azerbaijan, particularly in relation to development of democracy and respect for human rights. Azerbaijan's already poor democracy and human rights record is worsening, with media freedom deteriorating and a general disregard for freedoms of assembly and speech. These developments, in our view, threaten the long-term stability of the country, and eventually could put other areas of cooperation at risk. In the past year, the removal of Radio Liberty from FM airwaves, a referendum removing term limits on the presidency, new restrictions on religious freedom and the activities of NGOs, and the jailing of youth activists and bloggers have all seriously harmed bilateral relations and Azerbaijan's reputation in the world. High level USG visitors to Baku have repeatedly voiced concern to President Aliyev and other leaders here. However, in the past year we have not had a meeting of our high-level Democracy and Human Rights Dialogue with the GOAJ.

13. (C) We believe sustaining this Dialogue is a key component of our efforts to improve this situation and to advance democratization and respect for human rights. The Dialogue remains our best opportunity to discuss in a systematic way with the highest levels of the GOAJ the full range of democracy and civil society concerns, from legal reform to freedom of speech. Foreign Minister Mammadyarov has led the

talks for the Azerbaijanis in the past, and President Aliyev met with both David Kramer and Barry Lowenkron during their trips to Azerbaijan. We expect that both the Foreign Minister and the President would meet with A/S Posner in Baku. This top-level access to discuss democracy and human rights is unique (the EU has been trying for years to establish a similar dialogue) and would be lost if we discontinue or downgrade the Dialogue. Also, discontinuation of the dialogue might give Azerbaijan's leadership reason to think that the Obama Administration is not emphasizing democratic development in this region, or has downgraded its significance.

¶4. (C) Second, the Dialogue has demonstrated to the GOAJ, civil society activists, families of victims, and the international community that democratization and human rights observance remains a focal point of our bilateral relationship with Azerbaijan. A discontinuation or downgrading of the talks would likely be construed by these groups as well as a signal that the United States is reducing its focus on democracy and human rights. This would undermine efforts by civil society and the opposition to counter extremism by pressing for democratization and human rights observance. The opposition media has already criticized their perceived suspension of the talks, after similar talks were held in Georgia in November but A/S Posner did not travel to Azerbaijan. Particularly in the absence of a U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, the embattled defenders of democracy and human rights are counting on this dialogue as a key signal of U.S. commitment to our shared values, and we should not let them down.

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¶5. (C) Unfortunately, given the negative trends in Azerbaijan on democracy and human rights, we have not achieved most of the results we sought under the Dialogue during the previous administration. In the meantime, however, during which there has been an absence of the dialogue, the situation in Azerbaijan has gotten demonstrably worse. As part of its measurement of success, the dialogue should carefully assess any concrete action the GOAJ takes, including fulfilling earlier commitments believed to be made to David Kramer: release of journalists suspected of being imprisoned for political reasons, and allowing Radio Liberty and Voice of America to remain on the air in Azerbaijan while USG and GOAJ work out an agreement on their long-term status.

¶6. (C) While democratization in Azerbaijan is clearly a long-term effort, sustained U.S. engagement on this issue is important to our larger goals in the region. As Secretary Clinton said on December 14, "expanding the circle of rights and opportunities to all people, advancing their freedoms and possibilities, is why we do what we do." Azerbaijan, as a place where backsliding has begun, should be a priority country for U.S. engagement on democracy and human rights. We recommend that the USG maintain the high-level Dialogue through an A/S Posner visit to Baku at the earliest possible time.

GARVERICK